

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 5, 2023
“Salty Light” (Matthew 5:13-20)

This morning’s gospel text is a continuation of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In this passage, Jesus uses two metaphors to call his disciples to usefulness. He desires us to be useful citizens of his kingdom.

He begins by saying, *You are the salt of the earth*. Now, the people of Jesus’ day could understand this metaphor. Salt was a very precious commodity, having great value, somewhat like gold and silver do today. In fact, wages were often paid in salt. Jesus was telling them – as he tells us – that like salt, we have value. But our worth and our value do not come from anything *we* do because, by our very nature, we are sinful and undeserving of having any value placed on us. Rather, our value comes from being children of God, children of the Heavenly Father who loves us, pours out his grace upon us, and claims us as his very own; not because of our own merit, but simply because the God of love chooses to do so.

It is God, and God alone, who makes us priceless and precious. If there is any doubt, we only need to look at the cross. Through Christ, God shows us how much we mean to him. Not only are we redeemed through the crucifixion, but through Christ’s glorious resurrection, we have also received the gift of new life with God in his eternal kingdom. This is truly the greatest that has ever been given, and it is given for you and for me. Through this divine act of love, we see that, in spite of our shortcomings and failures, we have value in God’s eyes.

So, as salt of the earth – or valued children of God – what are we called to do? How can we be useful? Let’s begin by examining the natures of salt. It is, first of all, a preservative. Many of you remember a time when families raised their own animals for food. I can recall my grandparents butchering hogs so they would have pork to eat during the winter. I remember them taking the hams, pouring salt all over them, and rubbing it into the meat. Then they were wrapped in burlap sacks and hung in an outbuilding to cure. After a number of months, the ham was ready to eat. This was a moment of learning for me. I discovered that it was the salt which would allow those hams to hang there all that time without going bad or spoiling.

As the salt of the earth, Jesus is calling you and me to be preservatives – to preserve the goodness of God’s creation. The presence of sin in our world tells us that something in God’s creation has spoiled, and only salt can prevent that spoilage. We are the salt God calls to be agents of good.

Another attribute of salt is that it purifies. In the ancient world, salt was used as a medication. Even today, you and I gargle in salt water to relieve a sore throat. We also soak our wounds in it. It has a healing, purifying quality. As Christians, we are called to be God’s healers in the world. We are to be the salt that comforts the brokenhearted, gives hope to the despairing, and reduces the suffering of those around us. We are called to bring a healing quality to the world.

Salt was also the spice of life. As the most common seasoning, it brought out the best flavors of food. We, too, use salt to enhance the flavor of our food. Christians are called to be the spice in the world. We are called to make the world better and give it seasoning.

But if salt has lost its taste, Jesus continues, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. The salt used in Jesus' day came from the sea or ocean. By its very nature, after a certain amount of time, it lost its flavor, and consequently, its value. Being of no use, it was thrown in the streets or roads, and as people walked on it, it was ground into the earth. Jesus wants us to keep our saltiness and give flavor to the world, rather than blending into its blandness. We are to affect the world positively and bring out its best, just as salt brings out the flavor of food.

Jesus continues calling us to usefulness by moving to another analogy: *You are the light of the world.* You and I know the properties of light. Light breaks through the darkness and gives us the ability to see what we otherwise could not. It keeps us from the danger of stumbling around in the dark. The light we Christians have is sparked by Jesus, the true Light that shines in the darkness. And by this Light, we are, in fact, able to see something we otherwise could not have seen. Through the person of Jesus Christ, we are able to see God. This Light penetrated the darkness of our world and overcame the powers of sin and death. Living in our hearts and lives, this light empowers us to be a light in the world. And that's what we are called to do: to let our light shine so that others can see our good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven. We are to let the light of God's love shine like the lights of a city built on a hill that cannot be hidden, but seen for miles around.

Jesus continues by saying, *No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but he puts it on a lampstand and it gives light to all in the house.* What good would it be to light a candle and hide it under a basket? It would serve no purpose and benefit no one. Not only would it be hidden from us, but, because of the lack of oxygen, it would soon go out. A similar thing happens to us when we don't allow our lights to shine. It, too, gets snuffed out. But if we live for Christ, we will glow like the candle on the lampstand and the city on the hill, showing others in the world what a Christ-filled life is like and the good works that come from it.

So Jesus calls us to be both salt and light. And how are these two alike? Both penetrate. Salt penetrates its substance and light penetrates the darkness. Therefore, Jesus must be calling us to penetrate the world, to influence those around us. How we do this, I believe, is best said by the Apostle Paul. He tells us to put on Christ every day. This means we are to look to Christ as the ultimate model for our lives and then pattern our ways of living after him.

The most obvious way we can put on Christ is through the proclamation of the gospel. Christ came to proclaim the kingdom of God. We, in turn, are called to proclaim the good news and minister to the world. This proclamation is carried out not only by our words, but, in most cases, by our actions. By example, we can show others that Christ truly lives in us.

Putting on Christ means living lives of obedience. Jesus was obedient to God, even to the point of death. In the agony of the garden, he prayed, *Not my will, but you will be done.* Just as Jesus was obedient and sought to do God's will, we, too, are to seek God's will in our lives and try to please him through the things we do.

Putting on Christ also means loving our neighbor and showing compassion to those around us. When we reflect on Jesus' ministry, we see him not in courts or palaces – those places of status and authority – but in the midst of those in need: the poor and lowly, the sinners and tax collectors, the very dregs of society. He lived among them and had compassion on them. The needs around us take on different forms. The homeless need shelter, and the hungry food. The lonely and isolated need a visit. A struggling child needs tutoring. A friend or co-worker needs someone to listen. Jesus calls us to meet these needs where they exist; not from an arm's length away, but in the trenches, if you will, as Jesus did. He calls us to a ministry of love and compassion.

In a 1984 Washington Post article about Eleanor Roosevelt, columnist Ellen Goodman wrote: *She became a great lady, not because she was a first lady, but because she was able through enormous will to turn her pain into strength, to turn disappointment into purpose. The facts, just the facts, of her life might have defeated any of us.*

And what were some of these facts? As a child, she wore a brace for her back and was rejected by a mother who called her *Granny*. She idolized an unstable father and was orphaned at age 10. As a woman, she cared for her husband, Franklin, when he was stricken with Polio. After ten years of marriage and six children, she saw him fall in love with another woman. Yet, in spite of all this, she got involved in programs to help the poor, supported civil rights when it was still an unpopular cause, promoted women in government, and worked for human rights through the United Nations. Her life, her example of Christian living, and her good works have placed her among those who are considered the salt of the earth. She was a light to the world, a true disciple of Jesus Christ. And that, a nut shell, is today's message: discipleship.

Remember, you are special and valued by God; and because you are special, you are called to follow Christ and live for him in the world. As his follower, Jesus says that you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Without you, there will be tastelessness and spoilage. Without you, there will be darkness and despair. Without you, some may never know Jesus and his love.

Early in our marriage, Susan sang with a gospel group, called *Destiny*. One of the songs they sang nicely sums up my point. It goes like this:

*You're the only Jesus some will ever see,
You're the only words of life some will ever read;
So let them see in you the One who is all they'll ever need.
You're the only Jesus some will ever see.*

There really is truth in those words. You and I go through each day without realizing just how many lives we touch along the way. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves: Are the marks we leave helpful or hindering? Do we influence others positively or negatively? Have we seasoned the world with Christ's love? Have we been a light shining for Jesus?

Salty light. That's what Jesus calls us to be. How will we respond? Amen.